

MAPPING WORLDS

SHUVINAI ASHOONA

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Shuvinai Ashoona, *Composition (People, Animals, and the World Holding Hands)*, 2007–2008.

Fineliner pen and coloured pencil on paper. Collection of Edward J. Guarino, New York.

Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

WAYS OF THINKING

Ways of Thinking is designed for anyone interested in exploring contemporary art and its exhibition framework. It succinctly synthesizes information on the exhibition's concept, the artists and the works featured. For the complete version of *Ways of Thinking*, please see our website: <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/ways-of-thinking/current/?lang=en>

Mapping Worlds presents a selection of works on paper produced by Shuvinai Ashoona over the past two decades. Though many of her early drawings depict daily life in Kinngait (formerly Cape Dorset), Nunavut, continuing an artistic tradition begun by the artist's grandmother Pitseolak Ashoona (1908–1983) and first cousin Annie Pootoogook (1969–2016), Shuvinai Ashoona is best known for developing a personal iconography with imagery ranging from closely observed naturalistic scenes of her Arctic home to monstrous and fantastical visions.

This personal iconography, consisting of human-animal hybrid creatures, women birthing worlds and barren landscapes that appear to be post-apocalyptic even though they are inspired by the terrain of her northern home, project the past and present into an otherworldly, almost prophetic future. And, unlike many settler visions of times to come, which focus on violent clashes between humans and nature, humans and other humans, or humans and otherworldly 'invaders', Ashoona's earthly and extraterrestrial worlds exist within a kinder intergalactic future. By inviting us into her world, inner and otherwise, Ashoona makes it possible to further broaden our conversations about the changing northern landscape, the role popular culture plays in Arctic communities and, importantly, the ways in which Inuit art and artists are presented within Canada and abroad.

EXPLORE

As a title, *Mapping Worlds* can be heard as a description of Ashoona’s ever regenerating and expanding drawing practice. Mapping can also be found in the act of visiting the exhibition, where your navigation between works and in the thick of their details might inform a sort of cartography bringing you to think differently about Inuit art, life in the North, internal and external worlds, and a sense of ecology at once grounded in actuality and fed by the imagination.

In this instance, *ways of thinking* about Ashoona's work is as much a form of wayfinding as an exercise in critical analysis. What ways can you find through Ashoona's worlds? From where do you start? Where do you find footing across her spatial and imaginative terrains? How do you familiarize yourself with the people, animals, entities, and communities that populate them? Can disorientation be part of this process?

Below are some suggested points of focus to open up pathways among the works in the exhibition. These prompts can be combined with the contextual notes and extended labels authored by the curator and providing details on art production in Kinngait, Nunavut, background on Ashoona’s career, and close readings of three key works.

GLOBES AND REGENERATION

"Mapping" is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in the multitude of globes surging through Ashoona’s drawings. As a recurrent motif each globe is an invitation to look again.

Spotted with an endless variety of continents, Ashoona’s globes parade down the street in *To the Print Shop*, 2013. Globes rest on the seabed among schools of fish as fishing hooks and line descend from above in *Composition (Fish, Baleen, Globes, Pebbles)*, 2018 and they swim between clams in *Untitled (Clams and Globes)*, 2010. A massive salmon-skinned creature crams globes into its sharp-toothed mouth while others bubble up under its skin in *Untitled*, 2017. A pregnant woman’s belly swells with a new planet, as two larger globes are orbited by fish, tools, dwellings, and decorated eggs and fruit in *Untitled (Woman Giving Birth to the World)*, 2010. Eyes watch throughout, their irises replaced by globes.

More than celestial objects, Ashoona's globes are active participants in her worlds. Near ubiquitous, they're found under rocks, under skin, in dialogue with humans and animals. They form bodies and emerge from them. They inhabit worlds as much as they are inhabitable worlds.

They are also deceptively simple drawing activities: a circle, lines for coasts, blue for water, green and brown for land. Provisional and spontaneous, each composition adds a new variation. Their breadth represents the vitality and possibility they promise to hold as worlds, as well as what can be found in the contemplative act of drawing.

- EXPLORE
- Look closely at the different scales and types of the terrestrial: globes, built structures, rocky landscapes, seabeds, crevasses, and underworlds.
 - Consider the ways the globes interact with people, animals, and creatures.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND TEMPORALITY

Photographers can be seen traveling through works in the exhibition. As a minor figure amidst Ashoona’s ever-growing cast, they offer a shoulder to look over for another angle of view.

Pinned under the clawed foot of a hirsute giant in *Composition (Attack of the Tentacle Monsters)*, 2015, a photographer reaches to snap a photo of a small blue tentacle creature scurrying by beneath the bedlam. Sat among a scattered array of bones in *Posting Bones*, 2015, two people train their phones on a reassembled

animal skeleton. Camera in hand, a figure in a helmet and heavy suit peers out from behind a stone as a crowd of creatures crawl across the rocky terrain in *Creatures*, 2015.

Photography here introduces a sense of time, history, and transmission to Ashoona's work. There is a before and after to the attack, a record of the creatures' congregation, the sharing of photos of the carefully balanced bones. Carried around densely cohabitated worlds, the camera as an objective tool plays witness to these episodes and apparitions. At the same time, the activity within Ashoona’s worlds carries on irrespective of the camera’s gaze, its scale and range of life too vast, too vibrant, too lively to be captured and contained within any single frame.

- EXPLORE
- Shift your view to that of the camera's lens. How does this reorient your understanding of the scene? What forms of looking does a camera or phone elicit?
 - Look for photographs as objects in Ashoona’s compositions. What do they depict? How do they work in relation to the overall frame of the work? What sort of sense of time do they introduce?

TACTILITY AND INTERCONNECTION

Many of Ashoona's compositions are held together through acts of touching, contact that speaks to the density of her worlds and the associative connections she makes in her drawing process.

At its most dramatic this can be seen in *Composition (Attack of the Tentacle Monsters)*, 2015 in the clash between two giants, a tangle of orange and grey tentacles, while a hand from out of frame grabs a stray, flailing limb (and likewise in *Composition (Creature Invasions)*, 2017). In *Creatures*, 2015 slender, coloured snake-life figures wrap around each other, a yellow creature rests its paw on a cowering blue neighbour, a hybrid fish-like figure nurses two offspring, and, in the centre, a young creature peeks out from its guardian's amauti hood. In *Composition (Red Headed Octopus)*, 2016 one set of tentacles touch and fuse to the rocky landscape, while another fans out, connecting and framing a set of images of people and worlds. Finally, *Family Portrait*, 2014 shows intimate chains of connection through arms draped over shoulders and wrapped around waists.

Tentacles, fingers, limbs, and bodies all feel their way through Ashoona’s drawing. These are tentative and lateral moves—they crawl across terrain, they reach between worlds and beings, they pull people and creatures in and hold them close, as if no one is to be left out. Connecting and overlapping, they form a netting, a dense braid outlining the mutual entanglements and interconnection that give form to her worlds.

- EXPLORE
- Where does contact end and metamorphoses start? Look for the blurred lines where people, animals, creatures, and the landscape begin to fuse together.
 - The ways these connections reach out of frame. Take note of instances where figures look back at you, the viewer.

LEGIBILITY AND INTERIORITY

Cryptic and disjunctive text in both Inuktitut and English plays an important, if at times subtle, role in Ashoona’s compositions. Reading Ashoona's work helps feel out the place of the intangible and still in formation in her works.

In *Untitled*, 2017 eleven people work away individually at large sheets of paper. An overhead angle offers a global view on their writings: lists of Biblical cities mixed with major Canadian cities; notes on the horror film *The Exorcist* (a favourite of Ashoona's) and its star, Linda Blair; superheroes’ names; dates and budgets; and personal notes. In *Composition (Clams and Globes)*, 2010, tightly written text ring the clams' long, ribbed protruding siphons. Amid these exhaustive lists in Inuktitut syllabics on the use and characteristics

of clams is a line in English: INVISIBLE [sic] CLAMS FOREVER AND FOREVER. The texts read on clothing in *Family Portrait*, 2014 span graphic, declarative, and introspective modes, sharing information, half-finished acts of naming, and internal refrains.

This use of both Inuktitut and English text brings up questions of legibility and fragmentation: Whom is this addressed to? Who can read this? Yet, this play with access may be less about boundaries in communication than it is about the interaction between the visible and invisible. Carried by the body on clothing or inscribed directly on flesh or written down on a page, the texts relay emotional and psychological states, preoccupations, and fascinations. They also address the viewer. Small, tightly inscribed text guide looking towards reading, tempting fleeting narratives and connection with elements left undrawn.

- EXPLORE
- How Ashoona works with surfaces—terrain, skin, clothing, shells—as occasion for communication. Where does the text appear or behave as a part of nature? Where does it offer commentary, witness, or testimony? Does it always play the role one would expect on clothing or paper?
 - In what ways would you describe what you see? How would you narrate Ashoona's drawings?

BIOGRAPHIES

Shuvinai Ashoona was born in 1961, in Kinngait, Nunavut, Canada, where she lives and works. Solo exhibitions of Ashoona’s work have been organized at The Power Plant, Toronto (2019); Nunatta Sunakkutaangit Museum, Iqaluit (2013); MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina (2012); Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa (2009); and Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton (2006). Her work has been shown in group exhibitions at venues including the Esker Foundation, Calgary (2017); Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2017); Mercer Union, Toronto (2016), National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2014) and SITE Santa Fe (2014). Most recently, Shuvinai Ashoona received the 2018 Gershon Iskowitz Prize.

Dr. Nancy Campbell has been a contemporary art curator for the past twenty years. She has held positions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the University of Guelph, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and The Power Plant. In 2006 she curated an exhibition for The Power Plant of the work of Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook that travelled nationally and internationally, propelling Pootoogook to be included in Documenta 12 and winning the Sobey Art Prize in 2007. Her work with Shuvinai Ashoona began with a two-person exhibition at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto titled *Noise Ghost: Shuvinai Ashoona and Shary Boyle*. Since that time Campbell has focused her curatorial practice on the contemporary Inuit producing many exhibitions attempting to bridge the Inuit with the contemporary art.

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